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Planning Lessons and Courses

Designing sequences of work for the language classroom

Tessa Woodward

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Contents

1 Who are the students?

1.1 Introduction

The students we work with are the real reason for the whole learning/teaching encounter. So the most important thing we can do before, during and after classes is, in my view, to listen to students, watch them and read their work. This will help us to get to know them as individuals and thus will give us invaluable information when choosing topics and types of material including coursebooks, and when selecting activities and shaping lessons and courses. We can also involve students in these decisions. Even if our hands are tied in many matters because, for example, we have to stick to a syllabus or teach a certain coursebook, knowing as much as possible about our students will still help us decide on error correction, testing and homework and respond to them as individuals and as a group. It's perhaps the most natural sequence of all in teaching: finding out about the students and then taking account of this information in our work.

In this chapter I'll look at the things you can find out about learners, who you can find out from, how and when, and what you might use your understanding for.

1.2 Who can you find out from?

If you have been asked to take on a new class or one-to-one student, you can get information from the sending institution (if the students are coming in from somewhere else), past and present teachers, other 'stakeholders' (see below), and the students themselves. Let's look at the institutional level first.

The institution

Students from a different institution

Sometimes students come to our institutions from a different company, school or country from our own.

If the arrangements between your own institution and the sending institution are long term, what procedures are already in place for receiving, testing and teaching?

If a government or company is sending students to you for the first time, there will usually be some anxiety on both sides about getting procedures sorted out. It's vital that the teacher notes any kinks in a programme and makes adjustments fast.

If the relationship between the institutions is relatively new or you are new to the relationship, you will want to know:

- the nature of the sending institution
- its aims for the students
- what demands are made by the institution on the students before, during and after sending them
- whether the students are tested before they come
- whether a representative of the sending institution will be coming too and, if so, what relationship they have to the students. For example, whether they will be expecting to visit classes, or help with discipline while you are teaching.

Students from inside or outside your own institution

The sorts of things we could do well to know at the organisational level, whether students come from inside or outside our institution, are:

- whether the course is described or advertised anywhere and, if so, how
- whether any reports exist on past courses and whether any examples of past student work are available
- who is paying for the students to attend and whether attendance is voluntary or compulsory
- how the students are selected
- the length and frequency of the course, the mode of contact and the prescribed syllabus and materials, since these will affect the students
- why YOU were asked to take the course rather than another teacher. If you are told you were chosen because you were the only teacher who has experience of a particular exam or the target language, this will have a different effect on your work from being told, for example, that 'they want someone very creative'.

Although we might imagine that this kind of essential information would be provided for us, it's not always the case! Sometimes institutions feel these issues are so fundamental that everybody must know them already. Other institutions feel that these are somehow not teachers' but managers' concerns and that teachers should just go ahead and teach the

course. Sometimes teachers can't be bothered with this level of enquiry or we are too shy to ask.

Since the teacher is the one who works with the students day to day, it's vital that we know whether our students are forced to be in class, are paying for themselves, have a very specific aim in mind, or, for example, have heard very positive or negative things from past generations of students about our institution or ourselves!

The obvious person to ask about these issues is the person who suggests you take the class on. Ask gently, for it may be that the person has no idea of the answers and has not even thought of asking the questions themselves. Once you have explained how useful the information will be for planning and teaching the course though, most people will see the wisdom of the request. It's a good idea to suggest ways of getting the information or even offering to get it yourself, for example, by finding old files or reports, or phoning the sending institution. This will usually prompt some action.

Past and present teachers

If you are taking over or are going to share a class, it makes sense to talk to past or present teachers about the class (or write to them if they are in another institution). If possible, ask questions, and look at any notes on past work, materials used, test results, files on attendance, behaviour, etc. and any language learner portfolios. If at all possible, watch the students while they are being taught by their present teacher. You may or may not like the teacher's style but at least you will know what the students are used to and whether they seem to like it! You're also bound to pick up some ideas from watching someone else teach. If there is a good relationship between you and the previous teacher, then methods of working, materials and grading queries can all be dovetailed smoothly.

Other stakeholders

Other people from whom you can gain interesting information about the class may be parents and teachers of the same class but in different subjects. Try to talk to them where possible.

1.3 What you can know and why

The students

Your main source of information about a class will be the students themselves. You can get to know them by phone, letter, journal, tape, e-mail or face to face. You can get information before or on first meeting that helps you to do some initial planning. Information you get as you go

along will help you to adjust your planning continually. Information gained after classes have left will help you plan for similar future courses. Below is a list of some of the things it is useful to know about students and the reasons why you might want to know.

What	*Why*
• The number of students	So you can choose a room, plan the seating and materials and know whether one-to-one, pairwork or group work will be possible. Very large (50+) and very small (1–3) classes necessitate even more careful activity planning than usual if you are not used to these numbers.
• Names	So you can get them right!
• Sex ratio	So you know whether teacher and students match, and what the balance will be in your pair and group work.
• Age range	So you can allow for different energy levels, concentration spans and choices of topics. The amount of life experience students have to invest in particular themes such as 'work' or 'pop music' will make a huge difference to how long an activity will last.
• Mother tongue	So you can work out what to do if one or two students are without a mother tongue friend. So you can figure out how to establish an English-speaking community and predict what common strengths and weaknesses in the target language there are there likely to be.
• Nationality	So you can understand more about the politics, cultural conventions, prejudices and expectations of the students. Are there any possible 'enemy' nationalities in the group? Will this affect your seating plan? Are there cultural differences between students in, for example, the time of day they like to study, or the amount of background noise they can study with?
• What other languages do they speak?	So you can know how used to language learning they are, where English comes in individual students' and the school's priorities and thus what difficulties you can predict in their workload.

1 *Who are the students?*

What	*Why*
• Target language level	What results are there from any placement tests and outside exams?
• Student perceptions of their own competence	So you can add this information to standard test results and make decisions regarding student placement. A confident student may want to join a challenging class. A less confident student may prefer to go into a class slightly under their own level. If the students are already placed, it's still good to know who might be feeling under- or over-confident, and who you'll need to support or stretch.
• Profession and/or interests	So you can judge what content will support or expand their interests. What is each student an expert in and thus what can they teach others?
• Books and materials already used	So you can avoid duplication.
• Learners' target situation	So you can make decisions about the topics and skills you work on. Do the students need their English for jobs in, e.g. air traffic control or some other specialised use? Are they learning a little at primary level so as to get a head start at secondary level?
• Educational background	So you can judge what basic reading and writing skills they have in their own language. How cognitive and academic are they?
• Other commitments during the course	So you can judge how much time and energy they will be able to devote to classes and homework, how stressed or relaxed they will be and thus what workload and pace they can take.
• View of the course	So you can gauge how realistic their perceptions are and how well you can match their expectations.

Things that take a little longer to find out

What	*Why*
• Group dynamic and personality	So you can predict what attendance will be like and consider what to do about it if it's bad as well as considering who needs to sit next to or apart from whom. Are they often quiet, lively or motivated?
• What learner styles seem to be represented in the group? (You may take one of the frameworks available in the literature here, e.g. 'dominant sensory channel' (learning best by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, moving), or 'type of intelligence' (musical, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, spatial, naturalist, religious, etc.) or others such as self-concept, students' feelings about being in control of their own learning, or the difference in factors to which students attribute their successes and failures in learning (see Williams and Burden 1997 Ch. 5.3).	So you can choose methods and materials, and consider if your learners' ways of working fit your style and, if not, what compromises will need to be made.
• How learners perceive or mentally organise the language	So you can decide how to move students' understanding on.

These are some of the things it can be helpful to know. Some ideas follow on ways of getting the information from the students.

1.4 How to get information before meeting the class

A Letter writing

Depending on the students' language level, age and the resources available, pre-meeting can happen by different means.

- A letter can be sent from you to the new class, addressed to individuals in the group or, if their English is not very proficient, to them care of their teacher, in their mother tongue if necessary. In the letter you can tell them a little about yourself. You can also ask them to write to you telling you a little about themselves.

  If you have liaised with their teacher then she can help them to write individual or group responses to your letter. Alternatively, at higher levels and ages, they can reply on their own or with just a little bit of help. Of course some students won't answer the letter. They may forget, be too busy or shy or may not have the language. Others may give inaccurate information. For example, I have received letters from Norwegian or Swedish students who describe themselves as 'elementary' at English. From the naturalness of their letters, I find them near native in proficiency! In my experience, with pre-meeting letter writing, at least half of the students in their teens and above will answer. So you will gain a useful impression of the class you are about to teach. When you actually meet the class, you can start off by referring to the previous contact. It will make things friendly right from the start.
- If you feel that a letter is too personal for you, a questionnaire can be sent instead (see Scharle and Szabo 2000). If you have a good relationship with the class's present teacher, she may be able to coordinate more than just letters and questionnaires and get the class to send things such as photos or local information.

1.5 How to get information on first meeting

First lesson sequences

Some teachers hate first classes with a new group. Others really enjoy it. Many have a fairly routinised set of 'first lesson chunks' that they can use again and again with different groups. Such sequences mean that first lessons can be enjoyable and informative and therefore less stressful for both teacher and students. Picking up the odd new activity for an

otherwise well-established 'first lesson' repertoire ensures that an experienced teacher keeps interested.

The way different teachers put a first lesson sequence together will differ. I prefer to start with names and a little personal information and to build rapport in this way before moving on to serious language work. A colleague of mine likes to get going on language work first using the sequence '*How much can they understand?*' (see page 32), before doing work on names in the middle of the first class, and then giving information on the course and eliciting students' hopes for the class. Of course if you have gained information from letters and questionnaires or from watching the class before the first lesson, or if the class members know each other very well already, you will need to spend much less time on 'getting to know you' activities. Similarly if you know the new class level, perhaps from the results of a test you really trust, you can happily work with texts and tapes in the first class. Otherwise, it may be as well to work either with a selection of short texts at different levels or to plan mostly speaking and listening work with a little writing. Even if you are very skilled at thinking up reading tasks on the spot, when you find out that the level is different from what you expected, using one long text that is 'frozen' in level can be a tricky way for a teacher to start. It can also be a bit of a jolt to student confidence to meet a very difficult text or tape on the very first day, so you want to avoid getting the level wrong if possible.

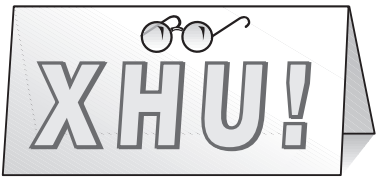
Name learning

There are scores of activities in coursebooks and teachers' resource books encouraging teachers and students to learn each other's names. This is because, whether you learn first names or family names, you accord a real identity to each human being in the room, you can call on them individually and as a result you can teach individuals rather than just the group. If you are not too good at remembering names and have large classes, here are some techniques to help you.

A

Labels

Ask students to make a little stand-up sign and to write their names in large dark letters. They add a little drawing connected to themselves as a mnemonic, for example, a pair of glasses or some tennis balls (see page 24). Take the signs in at the end of the first class and put a rubber band around them. Next time, using the students' mnemonics to help you, see if you can hand the labels back to the right people.



STUDENT NAME CARD FOR 'LABELS'

A

Register mnemonics

Using the class register, call out names one by one. Ask each student to say 'Yes!' and to do something easy in English, for example, say two words they can remember or introduce their best friend. While each student is doing this, note down a way of remembering that student. Use any mnemonic you can think of including hair length, posture, colour of clothes or wordplay on their names (for instance, if you have a student with the name Regina, imagine her with a queen's crown on her head). Make a note of these mnemonics on a piece of paper next to the name of the student. Don't forget to cover these notes up immediately, as a student glancing at your notes might see the helpful but potentially embarrassing mnemonics you have for them!

A

Settled places

If you have a large class with fixed seats and students who don't change places much, and you have no time for the mnemonics activity above, ask students to call out their names. Mark these on a seating plan as they do this so that you have a map of who sits where. Then as students do note-worthy things throughout subsequent lessons, mark these next to their name. It may take longer this way and you may not remember the quieter students for a long time but in the end you should have a mnemonic by most people's names.

A

Testing yourself

While the students are writing or engaged in group tasks, I spend long spells in the first few lessons with a new class trying to commit their names to memory. I memorise them by rote learning from left to right, from right to left, row by row. I test myself on all the students who have the same name, and all the ones that start with 'S' or 'B'. I continue this self-testing after class by taking a piece of paper and drawing two horizontal lines across it so that I have three sections on the paper. In the top section I write the names of the students that come to mind easily. When I start to slow down and search mentally for names, I move down to the middle section and start recording names there. After a while, I get stuck. I'll know there

are, say, 30 students in the class and I've only got 25 names recorded. So then I go to the register to see who I have forgotten. This will give me names of people whose faces or personalities I can't recall at all. These are the people I make a special effort to call on and remember in class next time. I repeat the exercise over the next few weeks until I have all the students well in mind.

(I learnt this from Mario Rinvolucri.)

Building a sense of community

You need to get the individual students in your classes working together as a cooperative unit. Here are some ideas to help you do this.

A Drawing yourself

1 Showing by quick lines on the board that you are no artist and that the drawing part of the exercise is the least important part, do a quick sketch of yourself, just head and shoulders.
2 Next, start labelling easy bits of yourself. For example, draw a line from the part of the picture showing your hair and write the word 'Hair' by it. Sign the picture as if you were an artist, using a flashy signature across one corner.
3 Now give out pieces of paper and ask students to sketch themselves, head and shoulders. Call it a 'vocabulary' exercise as this will take the students' attention off the potentially embarrassing fact that they are required to make a quick drawing of themselves. At higher levels encourage labelling of more difficult parts of the face such as eyebrow or freckle and ask for adjectives as well as nouns, so students write 'Oval face' and 'Pale complexion' rather than just 'face' and 'complexion'.
4 Provide any vocabulary that individual students are curious about. In a smallish class (up to 30), you can call yourself the vocabulary waiter and ask students to call you over when they want to order a word. In a large class (50+), store the requests for extra vocabulary and either teach them to the whole class or suggest that they look the words up for homework. They can bring the words they couldn't find to the next class.

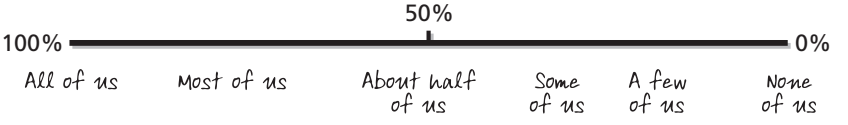
Variation
A variation on this exercise involves students sitting in pairs drawing each other, and then interviewing their partners and writing sentences about their partners under their picture. Done either way, the students will peep at each other's drawings. There'll be plenty of fun and laughter and this

will draw the group together. If you take the work in 'to check the spelling of the vocabulary', you then have a 'rogue's gallery' that you can study, linking faces to the names, at your leisure.

Group profile

A This activity can be done in the target language or mother tongue.

1 Explain that you are going to ask the group a question to find out more about them.
2 Ask something simple, such as 'How many of you live just five minutes from school on foot?' Ask students to put their hands up if they do.
3 Count the hands and make a sentence about the result, such as 'Nobody lives near the school' or 'Most people live near the school', depending on how many hands went up.
4 Everybody writes the sentence down.
5 Ask a couple more simple questions. They should be appropriate for the group and things that you really want to know, such as 'How many of you have a relative or friend who can speak English quite well?' or 'How many of you like doing English homework?'
6 As soon as students have got the idea of listening to a question about the composition of the group, raising their hands and then writing a summary sentence, encourage them to ask questions about things they want to know the answer to. If the people in the group don't know each other very well, there will be natural curiosity about who lives where, what sports, hobbies and jobs people do. If the students have been together for quite a while or are not naturally curious, they may need to be prompted to ask other useful questions, such as who has finished what school work or what homework was set for a class that somebody missed. (See box opposite for possible questions.)
7 Depending on the level of the class, you can gradually build a scale of expressions of quantity such as the one below, being careful about the following verb and whether it is singular or plural.



THE SCALE

8 Once everyone has asked something, everybody should have a list of sentences about the group. This is the group profile. It can be stored in people's notebooks or on a poster on the wall, and can be added to

later when more is found out about the group. The language can gradually be expanded too so that expressions such as 'several of us' and 'quite a few' are added to the scale above. The profile can give a sense of community and identity to the group. It may even contain answers to questions such as 'Why is this group different from other groups we belong to?'

Possible starter questions

Teacher

- How many of you live just five minutes away from school on foot?
- How many have a relative who speaks some English?
- How many of you like doing some English homework?
- How many of you enjoy listening to music with English lyrics?

Students

- Who likes playing basketball?
- Does anyone here want to go for a walk next weekend?
- How many of us feel happy in our jobs?
- Who has finished the second assignment for Miss X?
- Does anyone have a big tablecloth we can borrow for the end of term play?
- Did anyone write down the Biology homework?
- Why is this group different from any of the other groups we belong to?

Student expectations

Whatever you have been told about a group, I feel it's wise to spend time on first meeting trying to find out what their preconceptions and expectations of the course are. You need to know what they expect. You can then choose whether to harmonise with or challenge their preconceptions. Here are some ideas for finding out the way students are thinking.

A Why are we here?

In school, students are in class mainly because they have to be. In non-compulsory classes, it's a good idea to find out why people have decided to attend.

- You can ask students to spend 30 seconds each, round the class, telling everybody why they are there.

- Another way, at lower levels, either in mother tongue or in very simple language supplemented by mime, translation and picture dictionaries is to prepare a sheet of paper on which you have written reasons for attending, such as 'JOB', 'INTERNET', 'MEET PEOPLE', 'EXAM', 'GOOD FOR MY BRAIN', etc. Make sure students understand all the words, then ask them to circle the ones that are relevant to them.

Whatever method you use, I feel it's important for the whole class to hear or to read other people's reasons so students know whether their own reasons are unusual or in line with others'.

A Unfinished sentences

Another way of guiding students to let you know what they like or expect is to provide them with stem sentences to complete.

- On the board or on a handout, provide the beginnings of some sentences and ask the students to finish the sentences off any way they like. Here are some example sentence starters that you might want to choose from:

> By the end of this week/term/course I want to be able to …
> I learn best when …
> I don't like it when the teacher …
> We use a book and …
> When we do group work …
> When I'm doing English homework I …
> I can understand …
> I can't understand …
> I really hope I learn …
> In class I don't really want …
> The whole point of coming to class is to …
> Once in my life I'd like to …

Just as in the group profile activity above, it's important to make sentence starters that will tell you something you really want to know. Again I feel it's important for students to hear or read all the responses so that they can gauge if they are unusual in the group or not. Students can also write sentence starters for you to finish. Examples here might be:

I give A grades to students who …
The best grammar book for students to use at home is …
I put people into pairs because …

- You will probably need to help students to phrase their starter sentences unless you are doing the exercise in mother tongue or with a higher level group. As well as being a first lesson exercise you can encourage students to let you know OFTEN what they like and don't like in class.

If you want more ideas on how to elicit feedback in a sustained way and how to use the feedback gained to alter your classes, see Murphey and Woo (1998).

A The graph

The development graph can be used with adult intermediate learners.

1. Give out sheets of A3 (or large) paper and explain to the students that you will soon ask them to draw a line or graph representing their development in English so far. Give an example on the board. It's important that the board work is not too neat as this may intimidate people and make them feel they have to be good at drawing in order to do the activity. They don't! Personal graph lines can go up to represent times when students felt they were learning a lot or when they were enjoying themselves in English, they can go down if they failed an exam or didn't make much progress at a certain period, they can go round in circles for times of confusion, or be split into different paths for periods of choices, etc.
2. Ask students to spend a few minutes drawing their graph. Provide coloured pens and background music to make the activity enjoyable.
3. While they are drawing, ask them to label the high or low points with dates or notes so that later when they talk the graph through with a partner, it will be easier for the partner to understand. Inserting notes also provides the activity with face validity since it involves using the target language and not 'just drawing'.
4. If a particular student can't represent their path in graph form, invite them to try notes and dates instead.
5. After most people have finished drawing, suggest they take their graphs to another student and explain in English their career thus far in life. Set a time limit of, say, ten minutes for people to explain their graphs to each other.
6. When you draw people back together again you can ask them, as a whole group, what they feel is necessary in order to have a sense of progress in language learning.

A Bartering

Here's a lively activity that enables you and the group to find out what they expect of the course. The students can tell whether their own expectations are the same as other people's or not. If people know that they are not in the majority with a particular request, they can understand more readily that you may only get to it if all else has been taken care of.

1 You might like to start this activity off with some music that reminds the class of an oriental bazaar or perhaps ask how many people have experienced some sort of bartering system.
2 Give out one sheet of paper per student and ask them to fold it into three so that they can then tear off three separate strips to write on.
3 Ask students to write something different on each strip. They should write what they want from the class. This could be social, such as 'I want to be with my friends', or academic, such as 'I want to learn the way to ask for things when I travel', or any other wish, such as 'I hope we don't go too slowly. Last year this class was slow and boring.'
4 Give time for everyone to write down two or three things on their strips of paper. Students should sign each strip with their name.
   The next step will depend on how much space you have. If you don't have much room in your classroom, see the *Variation*.
5 Students keep their own strips of paper and stand up and walk around.
6 When they meet someone they read out one of their strips. If the listener feels that the comment is also true of their own feelings, they take the strip. When they 'buy' a strip in this way they sign their name to it. That way when the strips are taken in at the end of the activity, you can see by the number of signatures on a strip how popular an idea it was.
7 Students who have been listening then read out one of their own original strips and see if their partner is happy enough with the comment to take it as their own. If they are not, the reader keeps it.
8 Students keep walking around meeting new people and reading out and listening to what is on their partner's strips. The aim is to get rid of as many of the original strips of paper as possible.
9 You then ask people to sit down again.
10 Finish by asking people to read out the strips they ended up with.

Variation
If you have very little space, once students have written their three strips, continue as here:

5 Take in all the strips of paper, mix them up in a box and then go round

so that each student takes three strips that are not their own.
6 One student starts by reading out what is written on one of the strips they have taken. Everyone else listens.
7 They then look at the strips they have taken and if one has something written on it that seems to relate to what has just been read out, then they read it out. So if someone has just read out 'I want to have a nice time with my friends', then someone else might choose to read out 'I hope the lessons will have some breaks so that I have time to talk to my friends.' If there are no connections after a particular strip has been read out, then someone reads out a strip on a new subject.
8 Continue until all the strips have been read out.

You can also check against these expectations at the end of the course to make sure they have been met (see page 206).

(I learnt this activity from Richard Baudains.)

A 'What we are used to' sentences

If your new students have all come from the same institution or country, and are elementary level or above you can try this activity.

1 Ask each person to say one sentence about their previous class, school or institution. The sentence can be as short as they like, but it must be true. Here are some examples of things the students can say about their previous class: 'There were 32 students in our class. We were all 14 years old. Most of us lived in Kiev. Our English teacher was a woman. Our classroom was warm. The lessons were 50 minutes long. We had a video machine in our classroom.'
2 When students get stuck for something to say, give them a prompt such as 'Classroom … colour?' or 'How much homework?' It should be possible to get scores of simple sentences about the students' past setting which will let you know what they are used to. If you are planning something very different, you can show this by looking surprised at what they say or by discussing differences with them later on after the activity.

Variation
Ask students to arrange the furniture as it would have looked in their previous classroom and for them to behave as they would have done there. One student pretends to be the class teacher and they all replay a lesson. Students spend hours watching and listening to teachers and are usually excellent at noting their patterns of speech and mannerisms. There is usually instant mirth at this exercise but it also gives you a real feel for what the students are used to. Discussion can ensue on their feelings about

the methods and materials used and on what they feel they have learned in their past class.

Level

You may be lucky enough to have a clear idea of the level of the class you are going to take because you have, for example, administered a test of your own making or liking. If you are less certain of what the students can do, then all the exercises so far will give you important clues. You can also try some of the following activities.

A How much can they understand?

1 At the beginning of class, in a natural way, give the students some simple commands in English. Ask them, for example, to move their chairs a little or open their notebooks. See how much they seem to be able to understand and how much of a real language English is to them.
2 Draw a simple picture on the board, one connected to a story you plan to tell, and see how much in the way of vocabulary and ideas you can elicit from students.
3 Tell the story. Use mime, pictures and sound effects, anything to get the meaning across. In the story, leave gaps in your telling before any repeated words or phrases and see if the students can fill in any of the gaps for you.
4 Check their comprehension after telling the story.
5 Ask the students to write down any words or sentences they can from or about the story. If all this is done in a natural, gentle way you can end up after half an hour having a fair idea of who in your class can do what in English, and without the stress of a test. This might be a good time to tell students anything you feel they need to know about the course. For example, whether there is a coursebook and how they get it, times, breaks, where the toilets are, if there are any exams, and so on. It is unwise to give out this kind of information before you are really sure how much students can understand in English.

A One thing I know about English

Ask students to tell you one thing they know about English. If their level is low, they should tell you in their mother tongue, if you share it. Put some ideas on the board, for example, 'I know that the word for … in English is …' or 'The sound … is difficult for me …' or 'If I want to talk about … in English I can say …' You can prompt the students if they run out of things

to say by asking them whatever you think they should know, for example, 'What question words do you know beginning with W?' or 'Can you give me an example of a verb?' or 'How do you spell …?' or 'How can I talk about yesterday in English?'

This is an extremely interesting exercise for a teacher since it will tell you not what a past teacher has 'done' with a class but what student perceptions are of what has been done. Of course this activity can be used not just on first meeting but at the end of your own lessons and after other people's asking, for example, 'Well, what did you learn this morning?' It's important not to ask questions about the teacher but to ask about the students' learning. Another good reason for asking students to tell you what they understand about something is that it raises student awareness of what they are learning and why.

For more ideas on this, see '*Probing thinking to see what students understand*' on page 39.

A Class dictionary

This activity will give you a very good idea of your students' active vocabulary. I'll describe the activity first for a small group of, say, 7–15 students.

1 Give each student a piece of paper and say that they will write a topic area at the top.
2 Give them the topic areas. For example, one student can write 'FOOD' at the top of their paper, another can write 'SPORTS'. Choose the topics from ones you know they should have covered. (For examples, see the box below.)
3 Explain that they will soon be writing English words down under the heading. Give or elicit examples for each category. So, for example, the 'FOOD' person gets the starter word 'Bread' and the 'COLOUR' person thinks of 'Blue'. Each student writes down one starter word.
4 Now give the students time to write down all the words they know in their category. They can use a dictionary to check spelling. If students have problems with the alphabet, you can help by finding the correct page in their dictionary and then letting them do the rest of the search themselves. It's important to make sure they are trying to recall words they have met before and not trying to find new words. You can be part of the circle too.
5 When the first rush of words onto paper has subsided, ask everyone to pass their paper one person to the left.
6 Students read through the new piece of paper in front of them to check the spelling of the words already written by their neighbour, make a private note of any words new to them, and then add more words in the same category. You stroll around the room checking and helping.

7 Once the students have added as many words as they know to this new category, they pass their papers to the left once more.
8 The activity continues in this way. As more words are added to the list on each piece of paper, there is more recording and checking, more thinking and less writing. The papers should be circulated, always at the same time and in the same direction until each student eventually ends up with the paper he or she first started with. With ten categories at elementary level this takes about 45 minutes.
9 Each student can be responsible for taking home one piece of paper, checking the spelling and bringing it back for the next lesson. You can then make copies so the class has a record of the words they know as a group.

Variation
If you have large classes from, say, 15 students upwards, either put students into pairs so that two students can work together on each sheet of paper and topic, or with much bigger classes of, say, 30 or 40, put students into groups of ten. Get them to designate numbers so that everyone in each group knows who is number one, number two, etc. Then when calling out topics give, for example, all student ones 'Food' and all student twos 'Sports' and so on, as above.

This is the start of a class dictionary. It not only tells you student knowledge of lexical items in certain categories, but can be added to as new words come up in class. Students who made a private note during the activity of new words can look them up at home.

The class dictionary encourages an awareness of word groupings. When one particular group becomes too large, students can suggest new sub-divisions. For example, if the 'Food' category has too many words in it, the class could decide to break the category into 'Dairy', 'Meat' and 'Vegetables'. Students generally like this activity because it gives them the chance to recall and review words without the tension of a test. It encourages cooperation, dictionary use, word grouping awareness and individual responsibility. The end result is self-made and can be taken home, added to, stored and rearranged.

Categories for elementary level
Food, sports, colours, animals, places to go, numbers, days and months, jobs, verbs, adjectives, drinks, clothes, household objects.

Categories for intermediate level
Names of countries, languages, things found in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in the lounge, in the garden, hobbies, vegetables, fruit,

vehicles, special clothes for special jobs, adjectives of size, texture, shape, adverbs of frequency.

Categories for advanced level
Raw food, proteins, types of industry, types of government, special tools, expensive hobbies, cheap hobbies, indoor interests, outdoor interests, clothes for special occasions, phrasal verbs with 'get' together with an example sentence for each meaning, art forms, adjectives for weather temperature, ways of expressing vagueness.

1.6 How to get information during subsequent lessons

We can find out some things about our students (e.g. that they are very tired), by looking at their faces and body posture. We can then react quickly to the information (e.g. I'll do the idea I didn't have time to finish yesterday. That'll make them feel brighter.). At other times things are more complex. There is no instant way, for example, that we can find out that one particular student is hard of hearing but doesn't want to admit it or that a class is always out of sorts in Tuesday's third lesson because they are having trouble in the lesson just before ours. This kind of knowledge will normally come to us informally, over time and via a number of different sources. Similarly, there is no one quick, organised activity that will show us how our students are constructing their understanding of English. Sometimes a particular teaching style or a whole working method is necessary to bring this kind of information out. We thus need to keep our own antennae out all the time to pick up information informally through body language, casual discussion or by noticing repeated behaviour.

We can also plan into our work some deliberate elicitative techniques. Some ideas follow, first in medium to large classes, then, later on, in small groups or one to one.

A Name review – Chair swap

It takes me ages to learn people's names and so I always assume that students will need chances to review them too.

- If you have enough space in your classroom and up to about 20 students, try the chair swap game. Start by demonstrating it. Ask the students to sit in a circle. Call out the name of a student you